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CITATION:

NIYONKURU, Lothaire. Loan-Words in Kirundi: A Preliminary Study. African Study Monographs 1987, 7: 81-87

ISSUE DATE:

1987-03

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/68017>

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# LOAN-WORDS IN KIRUNDI: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the socio-cultural and historical factors that shaped the lexicon of the Kirundi language. The first part is a sketch of the ethnic composition and socio-linguistic situation of Burundi. The second part is a review of the historical context (mostly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) in which African, Asian and European linguistic communities came into contact with the Kirundi-speaking population. The paper discusses phenomena such as regional trade, migrations, colonial rule and civil war, and their demographic and cultural impacts which are relevant to an understanding of the roots of the contemporary Kirundi vocabulary.

## INTRODUCTION

Kirundi—or *ikiruúndi*—is a Bantu language indexed as D 62 in M. Guthrie's classification (Guthrie, 1948: 76) or as J 62 by the 'Lolemi' research team (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium). It is spoken by around 4 million people (Berciu, 1980: 115-122). There are some slight regional variations within the language, which in turn forms a dialect continuum with Kinyarwanda (*ikinyarwaanda*, D 61 or J 61) and Kiha (D 66 or J 66). The purpose of this paper is to study the social and historical factors which influenced and shaped the Kirundi language.

## ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC GROUPS

The three non-immigrant ethnic groups of Burundi, namely *Abahutú*, *Abatutsi* and *Abatwá*, speak Kirundi and share the name of *Abaruúndi*. A Swahili-speaking minority—*Abaswáahiri*—lives especially in urban and semi-urban areas and trade centers like Bujumbura, Gitega, Rumonge, Nyanza-Lac, Kirundo, etc. "The great bulk of the Swahili speakers are gathered in the township of Buyenzi in Bujumbura, where they form a close Moslem community of about 12,000." (Polomé, 1967: 6). The type of Swahili spoken in Buyenzi is very similar to the East African standard Swahili, whereas the other varieties are strongly influenced by Kirundi and Zairean Swahili. Most of the people who speak Kinyarwanda arrived in Burundi as refugees in 1959-1964 and in 1972-1973. Their major communities are settled in Bujumbura—they were 15% of the population in 1971 (Gatali, 1979: 48), in the provinces of Bubanza, Muyinga and Ruyigi. Other African communities, as well as people from Yemen, Pakistan, India and Greece, use Kiswahili at least as a second language and for commercial purposes. They live in Bujumbura, as do Europeans—missionaries, diplomats, members of the technical cooperation,...—who generally speak French, which was the second official language of Burundi according to the Constitution of 1962 (Bellon and Delfosse, 1970: 5). Some small immigrant groups from Eastern Zaire, e.g. the Bembe, Fuliru, and Vira—called respectively *Ababeémbe*, *Abafúreero*, and *Abaviírá* in Kirundi—are scattered along the eastern coast of the Lake Tanganyika and in the valley of the Rusizi river. Many

of them arrived in the area as war refugees in 1964–1965 (Acquier and Rollan, 1980: 145, 147). They were 24% of the population of Bujumbura in 1971 (Gatali, 1979: 48).

The current sociolinguistic situation of Burundi may be summarized as following:

- (1) The majority of the non-immigrant population speaks Kirundi.
- (2) There are two minorities speaking Kiswahili and French (*igifaraánsa*).
- (3) French is used for educational and administrative purposes. It is practiced from the fourth year of primary school onwards. The Constitution of November 20, 1981 stipulates, "Ingingo ya 7: Ururimi kavukire ni Ikirundi. Indimi zikoreshwa mu ntwaro ni Ikirundi n'izindi zishingwa n'amabwirizwa." (*Ubumwe* Nr. 302, Sept. 23, 1981: 3).

The French version is, "Article 7: La langue nationale est le Kirundi. Les langues officielles sont le Kirundi et d'autres langues déterminées par la loi." (*Le Renouveau du Burundi* Nr. 864, Sept. 18, 1981: 5).

That means, "The native language is Kirundi. The administrative languages are Kirundi *and others* to be established by the law." (translated from the Kirundi version and underlined by L. N.)

- (4) Radio broadcasts (since 1960) are in Kirundi, Kiswahili and French. Short news programmes in English were initiated recently.

- (5) Newspapers are both in Kirundi and French. Swahili publications disappeared in the early 1960's when Burundi became independent. (Many of them were printed by Catholic missionaries based in Bujumbura and in Eastern Belgian Congo and were intended for Catholic Swahili-speaking readers, mainly the "Congolese" settled in "Usumbura"—Swahili rendition for Bujumbura).

- (6) The neighboring linguistic groups are Kinyarwanda (Rwanda), Bembe, Fuliru, Shi, and Vira (Zaire), and Ha (Tanzania).

## HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Kirundi has incorporated loan-words from Kiswahili, German (*ikidaági*), French, ecclesiastical Latin (*ikirátini*), Lingala (*amaangara*), and Luganda (*ikigáandá* or *ikigáandé*). Many of those terms were introduced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The following section will focus on how various linguistic communities came into contact with the Kirundi-speaking population.

The Swahili language was introduced into the country in the mid-nineteenth century by ivory and slave traders from Zanzibar (Kinigi, 1980: 165–173). The traders followed the well-known caravan route from Zanzibar to Eastern Congo through Bagamoyo, Dodoma, Tabora, Ujiji and Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika (Ssekamwa, 1971: 9, 61–72; Osogo, 1964: 12–18). They landed in Uvira (Congo) ca. 1850 (Bishikwabo, 1981: 112). The Swahili traders selling Indian, European, American and other products (salt, cotton fabrics, ivory, beads, brass wire, cowrie shells, etc.), together with the slave raiders from Zanzibar, 'Omān, and Shīrāz (Sacleux, 1909: XVIII–XXV; Were and Wilson, 1968: 94–139) probably used the southern dialects of Kiswahili (Sacleux, 1909: 10–38; Sacleux, 1939: 1–2; Whiteley, 1975: 46–54; Polomé, 1967: 8, 12) as a 'lingua franca'. At present, the Kirundi term *umuswáhiri* generally means a Swahili-speaking and Muslim shopkeeper, trader or craftsman. (The term has sometimes derogatory connotations: someone who is cunning, sly, disappointing, unable to keep one's promises.)

The contact between those Afro-Arab merchants and Barundi was limited to the eastern coast of Lake Tanganyika (Kinigi, 1980: 170–171). During the 1890's, the region of Uzige—

or *Buzige* in Kirundi—, where the present-day Bujumbura is located, was an important area of “international” exchange. The plain of the Rusizi was also characterized by an intensive movement of different ethnic groups, so that the Vira, whose motherland was beyond Lake Tanganyika, were already settled there in 1896 (Gatali, 1979: 33, 43; Bishikwabo, 1981: 107–121). The coastal strip from Nyanza-Lac to Bujumbura suffered several attacks by slave-raiders. Swahili, Arab, Hindu and Pakistani merchants sailing from Ujiji and Uvira generally used Kiswahili (Gatali, 1979: 33–36).

Muhammed bin Khalfan, alias Rumliza (or *Rumariza*)—ally of the slave-dealer Muhammed ibn Hamid, alias Tippu Tip, who devastated the Eastern Congo from 1870 to 1884—controlled parts of the plain area but did not succeed in raiding the interior (see Oliver, 1965: 109–112; Whiteley, 1975: 72, 91). His failure was due to the mountainous terrain (1,500–2,000 meters high) and the inflexible resistance by the *Mwaami* (King) Mwézi IV Gisaabo (Burton, 1890: Vol. 2, p. 102 and Meyer, 1916: 165 quoted by Dickerman, 1984: 29). Mwézi IV had successfully repulsed previous attacks from Nyamwezi and Tuta (Ngoni) raiders (Baumann, 1894: 93–95, Chrétien, 1968: 48–85, and Vansina, 1972: 212–213 quoted by Dickerman, 1984: 30). Rumliza was defeated in 1892 near the Rusizi river (Weinstein, 1976: 2, 248–249).

In the years 1911–1914, “the population of the Swahili community (in Usumbura) was about 2,000” (*Buhonga Diary*, February 7, 1911, and *Jahresberichte-Urundi*, 1912–13 and 1913–14 quoted by Dickerman, 1984: 72). Kiswahili slowly infiltrated into the highlands by means of Afro-Asian and Greek merchants. However, its penetration was given more impetus by the arrival of Swahili-speaking people from the Eastern Belgian Congo during colonial times (in the wake of World War I).

After two decades of unsuccessful attempts to set up Roman Catholic missions in the then “Urundi” (Kiswahili for Burundi), which was part of the “Deutsch-Ostafrika” (Conference of Berlin, 1885), the White Fathers from Tabora, Vicariate of Unyanyembe, began to settle in the country under German protection (1898).

Protestant missionaries, e.g. the Church Missionary Society (Church of England), the “Neukirchen Mission Gesellschaft”, the Baptist Mission of Denmark, founded their posts between 1907–1908 and 1927 (Weinstein, 1976: 3; Oliver, 1965: 237–238; *Le Ruanda-Urundi*, 1959: 368–370). Seventh Day Adventists arrived in 1925. The “Bethel bei Bielefeld Mission” settled in Rwanda in 1907 and worked successfully until it was joined by the “Société Belge des Missions Protestantes” (1921). Some missionaries (C.M.S.) from Rwanda went to Burundi (*Le Ruanda-Urundi*, 1959: 368) and still use Kinyarwanda in their homilies, religious hymns and publications.

On May 24, 1903, after a five-year resistance, Mwézi IV Gisaabo submitted to the German military authority. Von Grawert was established as Resident of Urundi in 1906 but “the total European population of Rwanda and Burundi in 1914 was approximately 190, of whom about 130 were missionaries. The remainder included a few traders and about 40 soldiers.” (McDonald et al., 1969: 11).

The Germans opened the first schools for sons of chiefs at “Usumbura” and Gitega in 1909 and 1913 respectively. During their relatively short stay, they deliberately favored the expansion of Kiswahili as the administrative language of the East African colony (Polomé, 1967: 12; Were and Wilson, 1970: 208; Whiteley, 1975: 59–60).

Burundi came under Belgian control during the First World War when Germans were defeated by the Belgian-commanded “Force Publique” (based in the Congo) in June 1916.

Meanwhile (1912–1922), Ruanda-Urundi was part of the Vicariate of Kivu (*Le Ruanda-*

*Urundi*, 1959: 365). The missionaries used to preach in Kirundi but most of the religious terminology was adapted from Latin and Kiswahili. The liturgical language, namely Latin, was gradually replaced by Kirundi, the local language, according to the recommendations of Vatican II (1962–1965, see Abbott, ed., 1966: art. 36, pp. 150–151; fn. 34, p. 150; art. 40, pp. 151–152; art. 54, p. 156; art. 63, p. 159; art. 76, p. 161; art. 78, p. 162; art. 101, p. 167).

Under Belgian colonial rule, four foreign languages came into contact with Kirundi: French, Dutch, Kiswahili, and Lingala. French was introduced in primary and secondary schools with some grammatical and lexical features of the South Belgian or Picard dialects ("belgicisms").

Dutch was almost exclusively spoken by Flemish colonists—*Abaf(a)rama*—from the northern half of Belgium. It was also taught in some secondary schools together with classical Greek and Latin, English and German, but none of these languages had any noticeable impact on the local language, except perhaps for school slang. Dutch was also used together with French in bilingual publications as an official and administrative language, but in actual practice, it remained a minority language. (The term "Dutch" here refers to "Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands" (A.B.N.), the standard language used by writers, journalists, politicians, etc., as opposed to dialectal and popular usage).

Many people (office employees, nurses, mechanics, etc.) from eastern Congo came to Usumbura in the late 1920's and increased the number of Swahili speakers. By 1956, the African population of Usumbura was 42,155 (*Usumbura—Centres extra-coutumiers. Rapport annuel* 1956: 54; quoted by Dickerman, 1984: 21). Ruanda-Urundi had economic and administrative links with the Congo and at that time, the "Congolese" (*Abanyéekoóngo* or *Abanyéekoónko*) were 57.3% of the urban and semi-urban population of Usumbura, the great majority (72.3%) of which was foreign (Gatali, 1979: 33, 43, 49). They spoke the "Kiwana" dialect, although the Barundi themselves do not know that specific term and always call the language *igiswáhiri*. Many of the books and periodicals intended for them, e.g. *Dunia ya sasa*, *Bibi wa sasa*, *Hodi*, or *Kindugu*, were printed by the "Presses Lavigerie" (Usumbura) operated by the White Fathers who, moreover, published an average of 90.6% of all printed material for the period 1950–1959 (*Le Ruanda-Urundi*, 1959: 357; Baganzicaha and Lejeune, 1979: 17–20).

Kiswahili was also taught in Protestant schools run by the Free Mission of Sweden (Usumbura) which published a bimonthly Swahili newspaper (*Le Ruanda-Urundi*, 1959: 317; Baganzicaha and Lejeune, 1979: 15).

Lingala—or *amaangara*—was spoken by the Congolese soldiers of the "Force Publique" who occupied the country from 1932 (Gahama, 1983: 133) up to the late 1950's. The barracks were in towns like Usumbura, Gitega, Muramvya, etc. It seems that Lingala had very little influence on Kirundi lexicon.

One should also mention a social phenomenon which put Kirundi into contact with another foreign language, namely the emigration of Barundi countrymen to the Uganda Protectorate from 1920 to 1960 (see Chrétien, 1978: 71–101). Most of them went to Buganda from the eastern and northeastern regions of Burundi, i.e. Ruyigi and Musinga respectively. They were escaping from food shortages caused by drought in the area, and also getting away from low standards of living and colonial mistreatment. Others originated from the provinces of Ngozi and Gitega.

The highest emigration rate occurred between 1933 and 1947, so that in 1948, Barundi and Banyarwanda made up 20% of the population of Buganda (Chrétien, 1978: 79), and in 1959,

there were around 150,000 Barundi in the Uganda Protectorate. At the same period, more than 120,000 Barundi were in Tanganyika Territory (Chrétien, 1978: 72–74). Between 1931 and 1948, “the Ruanda and Rundi together not only increased more than the Ganda in actual numbers, but more than all the other African immigrants, and accounted for more than two-fifths of the whole African population increase in Buganda” (Richards, ed., 1973: 116).

The bulk of the emigrants were agricultural laborers growing cotton, sugar cane, coffee, and bananas (see Richards, *op. cit.*: 93, 165, 222). When they had earned enough money, for instance in order to pay tax (*ikoóri*) or bridewealth (*inkwáano*), the majority of them went back home, bringing with them a series of new terms borrowed from Luganda and Kiswahili (Richards, *op. cit.*: 15, 164, 222).

Foreign people are currently concentrated in Bujumbura: about 40% of the population of the capital city in 1977; but 95% of Barundi still live upcountry (Gatali, 1979: 46) and depend on agriculture.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, one may say that the main factors which influenced and shaped contemporary Kirundi to a certain extent are the following:

- (1) regional trade,
- (2) missionary and colonial phenomena with their impact on the political, economic and socio-cultural institutions of Burundi, e.g. the educational system and its linguistic consequences (“francophonie”, ...), the urban environment with its ethnic diversity, the great power of mass media of communication, especially radio broadcasting, and
- (3) the international political and economic context (emigrants, refugees).

A thorough study of loan-words in Kirundi should be conducted with this historical and socio-cultural background in mind.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** This article was initially part of a study carried out in the summer of 1981 and sponsored by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars, Washington, D.C., with a grant from the Fulbright Foundation (Grant Number: 81-162-A). My gratitude is expressed to both institutions. I also thank Professor Patrick R. Bennett (Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Wisconsin, Madison), Professor Jan Vansina and Mr. Tharcisse Nsabimana (Department of History, University of Wisconsin, Madison) for their comments, suggestions and criticism on earlier versions of the paper.

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—Received *February 3, 1986*.

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